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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a snapshot of 19 diverse school settings that have committed themselves to whole-school reform to make a meaningful difference in the lives of their students. The schools in this study reflect schools across the country and represent various levels of readiness. Earlier findings in these schools indicated that "although schools are attending to many things, many of them are not attending to matters that make a difference in the way schools operate and in the outcomes for students." Using Hord's five-dimensional model as a comprehensive design, the study's findings indicate that the key factor in whole-school reform is the leadership of the principal. Leadership practices in high-readiness schools were more effective than those in low-readiness schools in all areas under study: shared leadership, inspired responsibility for a shared vision, empowered decision-making, and inclusivity of staff. Principals in high-readiness schools were not coercive or controlling; they shared leadership, imaging it in the likeness of new conceptions of leadership. These principals were selective in their focus on a shared vision. Some elicited the dreams of others, while some shared their own visions and sought to mobilize efforts accordingly. (Contains 40 references.) (DFR)

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How Leadership is Shared and Visions Emerge in the Creation of Learning Communities

Introduction

"The most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as professional learning communities"(DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. xi). Although simple in concept, this latest call of hope is nonexistent in most schools. Following a five-year study of Coalition of Essential Schools, Muncey & McQuillan (1993) argued that,

> It is all the rage for people to say that the latest wave of reform will be the reform that's going to make the difference...our evidence suggests that even when there seems to be consensus that change is needed and even when dedicated and well-intentioned people are trying to bring it about, issues and problems – often unanticipated – arise that threaten and impede the change process almost from its inception...many lessons still need to be learned about achieving the ambitious aims of current reform efforts. (p. 489)

Fullan (1995, 2000) added that most school reform efforts have created overload and fragmentation, thereby resulting in a lack of coherence and meaning which continues to divert us from issues of greatest importance – teaching and learning. For instance, many governance structures have been designed to empower a greater number of staff in decision-making, yet students fail to reap the benefits. Efforts are often unrelated to curriculum and instructional issues, and systems are not aligned to focus on the process it takes to move students to higher levels of achievement (Fullan, 1995, Guskey & Peterson, 1993; Lindle, 1995/1996; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). In the guise of teacher empowerment, "Traditional opportunities for teacher decision making have done little to advance the professionalism of teachers, or to involve them in critical educational concerns" (Brown, 1995, p. 337).

A more recent trend suggests that "change will require a radical *reculturing* of the school as an institution, and the basic redesign of the teaching profession" (Fullan, 1995). Reculturing

is said to occur by developing work cultures that affect the core of the culture of schools, which will drive structural change. In an interview conducted by Dennis Sparks (1999), Ann Lieberman defined these cultures as professional learning communities or "places in which teachers pursue clear, shared purposes for student learning, engage in collaborative activities to achieve their purposes, and take collective responsibility for students learning" (p. 53). To institutionalize this concept, she proposes the need to develop capacity through a community of leaders, which necessitates increased responsibility, greater decision-making, and more accountability for results among all staff.

Beyond dispute, the role of the principal is key. Effective leadership is about facilitating change centered on teaching and learning. Principals can make a difference indirectly in student learning by influencing internal school processes, engaging teachers to fully participate in decision-making, and developing a shared sense of responsibility on the part of all staff members to improve the conditions for learning in schools (Davis, 1998). The principal's most significant effect on student learning comes through his/her efforts to establish a vision of the school and goals related to the accomplishment of the vision (Hallinger & Heck, 1996 in Davis). Sharing leadership and aligning people to a vision is crucial and leads to a "leadership-centered culture...the ultimate act of leadership" (Kotter, 1990, p. 11). Nonetheless, Fullan (1993) warned of premature attempts to create a vision without shared leadership and participatory governance structures.

Organizations learn only through individuals who learn (Senge, 1990, p. 139). Leaders set conditions that encourage new ways of thinking and interacting to build capacity and school-wide commitment to a shared vision. Learning evolves and must engage and nurture interdependent thinking in an environment where all people are valued. "The organizations that

will truly excel in the future will be the organizations that discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels in an organization" (Senge, 1990, p. 4).

The literature is replete with information defining professional learning communities and illuminating their characteristics (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 1997, Louis & Kruse, 1995). Nonetheless, little is known as to how to create, much less sustain these communities of learning (Hord, 1997; Zempke, 1999). Zempke's interview with Peter Senge revealed the task to be more formidable than expected - "a slippery concept to put into practice" (p. 41). Senge viewed the successful organization as a metaphor,

> an 'organism' with the developed capacity to continually enhance its capabilities and shape its own future...It has a purpose and a vision. It is aware of its feedback systems and alignment mechanisms, and deliberate about the way it uses them. (p. 41)

The challenge is how to move from concept to capability.

In the initial stages of a five-year project, *Creating Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement*, sponsored by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL), Hord (1996) found that schools operating as professional learning communities shared five interactive dimensions: shared and supportive leadership, shared vision and values, collective learning and application, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice. Her findings followed an intensive search for such schools.

The purpose of this paper is to focus on two of the five dimensions identified by Hord: shared and supportive leadership and shared vision and values. Of particular interest is the effect these two dimensions have on creating readiness for a professional learning community. In examining the interdependency of these two dimensions and their effects on readiness for creating professional learning communities data were examined to determine:

1. In what ways do principals in high readiness schools share leadership,

empower decision-making, and inspire responsibility for a shared vision?

a) Do these practices distinguish themselves from those exhibited by principals in low readiness schools?

2. Are practices in shared leadership, shared decision-making, and visioning more inclusive of staff in high v. low readiness schools?

Theoretical Framework

Among the many related definitions of professional learning communities, Hord (1997) focused on what Astuto and her colleagues labeled as *professional communities of learners*, "in which teachers in a school and its administrators seek and share learning and then act on what they learn" (p. 1). Within this notion, she defined *shared and supportive leadership*, as a participative interaction between school administrators and staff, within a culture of shared power, authority and decision-making. Further, her image of *shared vision and values* involved an undeviating focus on student learning, consistently reflected in the collaborative work of staff. Together, the principal and staff decide on the values and vision of the school and support its realization. In turn, the shared values and vision guide the principal and staff to engage interdependently in making individual and collective decisions on substantive issues.

Schools that distinguish themselves as high or low readiness appear on a continuum as measured by Hord's *School Professional Staff as Learning Community* questionnaire (1997). *Shared and supportive leadership* ranges in practice from administrators sharing little information and decision-making opportunities with staff to consistent involvement in most school issues with the entire staff. *Shared vision and values* range from divergent visions of improvement unrelated to teaching and learning to shared visions focused on quality learning experiences for all students.

Review of the Literature

Shared and Supportive Leadership

It is clear that successful communities of learners share important visions, relationships, and strategies in their efforts to achieve results for students. Their success is due to many factors, but critical to this effort is dynamic shared leadership combined with physical and cultural support, and staff who work well together. In her landmark book, Leading to Change, Johnson (1996) stated:

> Today's school leaders must understand both the limits and the potential of their positions, carefully balancing their use of positional authority with their reliance on others, gradually building both a capacity and widespread support for shared leadership and collaborative change. (p. 11)

Leadership is about setting a direction, aligning people toward a vision, and motivating and inspiring momentum by overcoming barriers and appealing to human needs, values and emotions (Kotter, 1990). Leadership is about "reflection, inquiry, conversations and focused action – professional behaviors that are an integral part of daily work" (Lambert, 1998). An environment of trust, openness, support and safety must exist for staff to take collective responsibility for student learning.

Leadership is more than one leader guiding the rest of the school (Lambert, 1998). Shared leadership promotes a multitude of interactions and relationships that build capacity for change. She stated in her book, Building Leadership Capacity in Schools, that:

> School leadership needs to be a broad concept that is separated from person, role, and a discrete set of individual behaviors. It needs to be embedded in the school community as a whole. Such a broadening of the concept of leadership suggests shared responsibility for a shared purpose of community. (p. 5)

When leadership is shared, it involves all members of the organization in multiple leadership roles, structures and communication networks – a nurturing of gifts, talents and

diversity among unique individuals. Congers (1994) claimed "The scarcity of actual leaders is a reflection of neglected development rather than a dearth of abilities" (p. 29). The principal is key to building capacity in a trusting environment. Madsen & Hipp (1999) maintained that,

> Active participation enhances the teachers' views of the institution's practices as fair and worthy of trust...In a healthy school, the principal, unimpeded by the administrative hierarchy, leads in an open, friendly manner showing a genuine concern for the welfare of teachers. (p. 261)

The ultimate form of teacher disdain results when principals view their position in a hierarchical fashion, giving lip service to empowerment, and reserving veto power over critical decisions (Short & Greer, 1997). Teachers' perceptions of their limited influence in important decision-making processes have been reinforced. In turn, teachers are either apprehensive about assuming leadership responsibility or misinterpret the intent of their principals. Some teachers view principals as abdicating their power, whereas others reject responsibility out of fear of failure – allowing the principal to assume the blame if outcomes fail (Hipp & Bredeson, 1995).

Fullan's (1995) plea for a radical reculturing of the school forces new conceptions of leadership for achieving our purpose. "Institutionalizing a leadership-centered culture is the ultimate act of leadership" (Kotter, 1990) – a significant challenge since leadership is rarely visible beyond the role of the principal (Brown, 1995).

> Leader is a word that is rarely used in discussions among educational personnel, and yet, those in the field of teaching refer to it as a profession...the administrators – are responsible for most, if not all, of the critical decisions that may directly affect the daily lives of both teachers and students. The mere thought of professionals not having considerable input concerning critical issues and decisions that occur each day seems somewhat absurd, although this absurdity governs the daily lives of many in the teaching profession. (p. 335)

Leaders understand that to be successful they must take maximum advantage of their human resources. When every person at every level is afforded the power to initiate change, they are more apt to commit to both classroom and school.

In a "biting critique" of the historical study of leadership, Joseph Rost (1993) revealed a new paradigm of transformational leadership that involves "an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflects their mutual purposes" (p. 102). This "multidirectional" flow is a process that allows leadership to permeate traditional boundaries within the organization and visions to emerge from the interactions which reflect the shared values, beliefs, and commitments of the whole organization. A vision of shared leadership can help teachers and principals "respond less randomly and more coherently and cooperatively to the thousands of situations they face every day in the schools" (Lewis, 1989, p. 40)

Shared Vision and Values

Senge (1994) proposed that,

> at the heart of building shared vision is the task of designing and evolving ongoing processes in which people at every level of the organization, in every role, can speak from the heart about what really matters to them and be heard. (p. 299)

Change often occurs when people embrace the need for something better than they have, often initiated by a crisis or opportunity. Each school is unique. "There can be no blueprints for change that transfer from one school to the next (Fullan & Miles, p. 92, in Brown, 1995). Visions cannot be imposed, but emerge over time. DuFour & Eaker (1998) urged the co-creation of a shared vision and asserted that,

> The lack of a compelling vision for public schools continues to be a major obstacle in any effort to improve schools. Until educators can describe the school they are trying to create, it is impossible to develop policies, procedures, or programs that will help make that ideal a reality...Building a shared vision is the ongoing, never-ending, daily challenge confronting all who hope to create learning communities. (p. 64)

If people get a sense of the capacity of an organization, it motivates all members to higher levels of creativity and commitment to teaching and learning. Lambert (1998) suggested developing

> a shared vision based on school community values by involving staff and community in a process that allows them to reflect upon their own cherished values, listen to those held by others, and make sense through dialogue of how to bring personal and community values together into a shared vision statement. (p. 27)

Shared vision is "the lens for viewing every major decision and crucial action in a school" (Hultgren & Riedlinger, 1996, p. 12). Ellis and Joslin (1990) maintained that before visions can emerge, staff must engage in processes to come to consensus on its current reality. "Each individual has an incomplete picture of the whole school" (p. 4). The pieces of this picture must come together for staff to identify barriers and to make informed decisions as to where the school could be. The leader points the direction, while the staff determines what the destination will be (Barth, 1990).

Commitment to a vision is governed by the school culture, which Peterson (1999) defines as,

> the underground stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions and rituals that builds up over time as people work together, solve problems, and confront challenges...Culture informs the actions and spirit of school life. It shapes a school's motivation, commitment, energy and focus. (p. 17)

Commitment and vision co-exist. Additionally, personal vision and values must be linked to the organizational vision. The two must connect for commitment (Senge, 1990). Leadership is communicated by actions and words, modeled by behavior consistent with values (Bivins-Smith, 1996). Ellis & Joslin (1990) maintained that,

> Until a school staff has both reasons and experiences that demonstrate to them that they share in the governance of what the school might be, they are most unlikely to willingly share in the responsibility of bringing the vision to a reality. It is this linking of social

> structure with individual motivation that produces the power and energy to make significant differences in our schools. (p. 8)

Leaders must set direction, align the energies of diverse groups of people, support the interdependency of its individuals, and empower collaborative decision-making to actualize the vision. "Time is the most precious currency of life, and how we spend it reflects what we truly value" (Leider, 1997).

Methodology

Overview of Project

This study is part of an extensive five-year exploration of the development of professional learning communities. The study is being funded by the Department of Education through the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL), one of 10 research and development laboratories located across the United States. The study involves 20 schools across nine states including the midwest, southeast, northwest, and predominantly, Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Arkansas. Shirley Hord is the program director and initially invited 30 Co-Developers, or external change agents, to participate in this project at the beginning of the third year. In turn, each Co-Developer selected a school to collaborate with in its development into a professional learning community. Co-Developers represent schools districts, state departments of education, regional laboratories, and universities. The school sites range from elementary, middle, high schools, representing rural, suburban, and urban settings.

The first two years of the project, Hord and her staff (1997) reviewed the literature and identified five interactive dimensions of a professional learning community: shared and supportive leadership, shared vision and values, collective learning and application, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice. Next, the researchers investigated schools nominated as

potential learning communities. Only five schools across SEDL's five-state region qualified under these criteria. The staff then interviewed teachers, administrators and others working with the schools to begin to uncover the rich details of how their learning communities came to be.

Beginning the third year in August of 1997, project staff enlisted 30 Co-Developers. This diverse group of educators met three times in Austin developing trusting relationships, pooling knowledge and skills, developing facilitation tools, engaging in a variety of group processes, and experiencing the challenges and excitement of coming to "be" a community of learners. In September, 1998, the fourth year began with a joint meeting involving SEDL staff, 20 returning Co-Developers, and a principal and teacher representative from each study site. The Co-Developers and SEDL staff meet approximately three times a year, and school staff returns on an annual basis.

Data Collection/Analysis

Phase 1

Once school sites were selected, principals and teacher representatives from 19 schools were interviewed by telephone using a semi-structured interview protocol designed around Hord's five-dimensional framework of a professional learning community (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The 38 interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed by a six member research team (five Co-Developers and one SEDL staff member) using a series of inter-rater reliability techniques in a systematic process to achieve trustworthiness (Leedy, 1997). Each researcher coded for evidence every transcribed interview according to an assigned dimension and identified themes (Miles & Huberman, 1984). The coding was then analyzed and validated by a second researcher for agreement and refinement. Salient characteristics were identified to determine key themes that illustrated the interactive nature of Hord's five characteristics in practice. Next, each

researcher shared the analysis of her assigned dimension, and then the research team worked in pairs to study the transcriptions and coding for each dimension and placed the schools in an initial sort of high, mid, and low readiness. Secondly, each pair developed distinguishing descriptors for high and low readiness schools. The research team compared paired sorts and engaged in "round the clock" dialogue surrounding the findings. A consensus was developed and schools were placed in two clusters – HRL (High and Mid-High) and LRL (Mid, Mid-Low and Low). The analysis was based on a wholistic interpretation of the dimensions of a professional learning community.

Phase 2

At the end of the first year of the school's involvement, teachers and principals returned to SEDL and were interviewed regarding the evidence of the five dimensions within their schools. The 38 interviews were analyzed by the research team; however, during the second phase, the research team analyzed the data per assigned dimensions according to key points, key quotes, and emerging themes. Again, the research team reconvened and discussed distinguishing characteristics across high and low readiness schools, which remained intact. Both data sets were used for this study, The evidence in this study suggested a contrast between schools exhibiting characteristics of a high-level of readiness following the first year of involvement, and those schools that were less ready in developing a learning community. Although most schools were not at a high level of readiness in this early stage of the study, seven schools demonstrated characteristics of high-level readiness with regard to shared and supportive leadership, shared vision and values, and inclusiveness of staff. The primary purpose of this preliminary investigation was to capture the stories of these learning communities as they emerge. Hord's (1997) framework guided the data analysis.

Findings

The discussion of findings distinguishes the evidence between high and low readiness schools for creating professional learning communities. Specifically, it addresses the following questions. In what ways do principals in high readiness schools share leadership, empower decision-making, and inspire responsibility for a shared vision? Do these practices distinguish themselves from those exhibited by principals in low readiness schools? Are practices in shared leadership, shared decision-making, and visioning more inclusive of all staff in high v. low readiness schools? Applying direction from Hord's (1997) model, this section is organized around the following sections: shared leadership, inspired responsibility for a shared vision, and empowered decision-making.

Distinguishing Evidence between High and Low Readiness Schools

Shared Leadership

An analysis of staff efforts in developing a professional learning community around shared leadership revealed the following interactive themes: capacity building, creating conditions for participation, and empowered decision-making. Evidence related to empowered decision-making will follow the shared vision section to reflect the natural sequence of developing communities of learners and leaders indicated in the literature. High and low readiness schools varied significantly in shared leadership.

High Readiness Schools

In *high readiness schools*, principals mirrored new conceptions of leadership. They were proactive; chameleon-like it seemed – intuitively sensing where support was needed, when to stand back and when to take the lead, revealing the interactive nature between leadership and followership. Principals built on the strengths of their teachers. They had high expectations that

focused on student learning and were purposeful in building capacity. One principal commented, "The job is simply too big for just one principal. We as a school do better at problem solving and meeting the needs of kids when enhanced by a meeting of the minds." At another school, a teacher revealed specifics,

> The principal models what she expects teachers to do – read, study, discuss common goals, share, attend professional development, and grow professionally. The support is there...and choices. She is building a team of experts full of confidence in their abilities...validated as professionals.

Teachers who asserted leadership were growing in knowledge, skill and number. As one teacher emphasized, "Some leaders are designed by position, others have stepped forward to take on leadership roles. One teacher used the metaphor of having an "anchor at each grade level that can really make a difference." On a broader scale another teacher a described her perceptions at a deeper level of shared leadership,

> I would almost say that we are a community of leaders. What I see in the function of the community spirit to be is to identify strengths and divide responsibilities up amongst different members of the faculty...and defer to each other for those areas where we might have expertise. So, it is not unusual, for example, for her [the principal] to turn right around and come to me for questions in my area of expertise. And I see that happening all over the staff.

High readiness schools were characterized by schools that were reculturing as reflected in the literature (Fullan, 1995, 2000). Roles and responsibilities are being embraced more deeply throughout the organization. Structures were established that enhanced the values, beliefs, and goals of the organization with a clear focus on student learning. The growing pains of change were revealed through one principal,

> The faculty has more power than ever before. At first the teachers were overwhelmed with their new roles, but now they enjoy taking responsibility. I keep emphasizing, 'It's your school.' I want them to feel empowered and engaged in all aspects of the school.

Teachers did not view principals as abdicating their power, but recognized the emerging nature of changing roles,

> It's envisioning leadership so that you realize that this person is still a strong leader even though they are not the one making all the decisions and directing everything, because it requires strength of leadership to stand behind you and your decisions. I consider a strength of leadership to say, 'You are the expert. You make the decisions and I will support you.'

Principals in high readiness schools took the risk of "letting go" and appeared to believe in the capability of their teachers. Leaders were apparent in multiple structures in these schools – working systematically to establish greater teamwork at a whole school level. Beyond leadership teams, which were present in every school in the study, others included: grade level and subject area teams, team leaders, special projects coordinators, curriculum specialists, teacher facilitators, trainer of trainers, committee chairs, team leaders. Structures were organic and relate to the unique context of each school. There was a common perception that leadership is emerging and lies deep within the school, both formally and informally. There is also the perception that the principal was key in establishing the conditions that make it successful.

Principals were proactive and innovative. They "planted seeds", encouraged teachers to initiate change, and provided resources to make things happen. They had creative ways of getting around the rules instead of just saying 'no' or vetoing suggestions. Teachers were apt to embrace leadership responsibility as compared to those in low readiness schools because conditions were established for trust and respect. One teacher described this with confidence,

> The steps that I've taken as a teacher leader in the unit and as a perceived teacher leader on staff will model activities that are necessary to build trust within the staff. The great part of that is that my principal understands and accepts my role.

Teachers were made to feel like professionals. Principals depended on teachers for their input, guidance and ideas. They were keenly aware of what teachers were addressing with

students and how they were working on campus goals. Teachers weren't granted authority; they had it – in a "power to" rather than "power over" sense. Team building was a part of the school culture, as teachers noted,

> We are doing a number of things to create team building to enhance the level of trust within staff members, and that willingness to discuss areas and issues head-on, as opposed to engaging in parking lot conversations. Trust is the first level at getting to a professional learning community.
>
> Leadership teams facilitate strategic planning processes... They trained facilitators from all grade levels and disciplines to use consensus.

Low Readiness Schools

In *low readiness schools*, teachers viewed shared leadership more suspiciously than their counterparts in high readiness schools. It was reported that teachers were content to exhibit leadership in their classrooms, but wary of accepting responsibility at the building level. One teacher expressed, "We have opportunities for leadership and you go because she asks you and you hate not to go." Others indicated that shared leadership existed in their schools, but were unable to offer examples in practice. Most examples for shared leadership were evidenced in a position, a person who was second in command, or more limited in single structures such as the school's leadership team. Evidence suggested that teachers were empowered to deal with managerial and classroom tasks, but were minimally involved in teaching and learning at the school level or with organizational issues in general. One teacher finally expressed that "minute responsibilities by certain individuals were allowed," after some real probing.

The style of principals in low readiness schools were expressed through teachers as varied, ranging from directive to laissez faire to focusing on managing rather than leading. One teacher hesitantly spoke to the varying level of commitment to shared leadership in her school,

> I think we are still very much...uh...we are...that our leadership is still very much dominated by the principal. I feel that a lot of our older staff members have a difficult time blurring that line. They are not proactive. They are reactive. I feel that younger staff members are taking it upon themselves to share the leadership and broaden the scope.

Another teacher discussed that assertive teachers in his school asserted power, while others did not. Various socialization processes were tried unsuccessfully, attempting to regain a level of support and trust that once existed. Other comments related to principal autonomy and mixed messages,

> Our principal listens to suggestions but has the final word...He works a step ahead, not side-by-side.

> Our principal has the final word, but teachers pretty much have a voice in what goes on.

A more laissez faire style was also evident in some schools in terms of commitment or in the pretense of purposeful leadership. For instance, one teacher revealed the lack of principal enthusiasm for the SEDL project and the need for the Co-Developer and teachers to urge participation. "Commitment and trust are improving, but generally a climate of apathy regarding shared leadership exists. It is perceived as more responsibility and work". Another teacher reiterated the words of his principal; "Y'all decide how you want to do it. You know, however you want to do it is fine with me." Another school revealed different styles between building administrators – one focusing on leadership, and the other on management, "Our assistant principal is not as open to new ideas [as the principal]. I think he is more worried about procedure rather than results." A principal in another school concurred,

> I see management as the key component in shared leadership. Once persons under your charge understand philosophically, as well as theoretically, where you are, you tend to get more out of an ongoing process that will eventually be recognized in results and products.

Finally, some low readiness schools are highly committed and becoming more reflective of high readiness schools as a result of their involvement with SEDL. Trust is developing in some schools as more extensive shared leadership structures are being established and goals are established. Moreover, some schools had greater obstacles to overcome in the beginning. One principal argued,

> I feel shared leadership must precede visioning. Trust is critical and building slowly with shared leadership. Our situation is that we had to overcome a lot of obstacles and this is very new to us. Just to get to the point where we could trust and talk freely to each other about issues related to education has been an obstacle to overcome. There are not enough of us to take us where we want to go. As long as teachers aren't doing anything to prevent us from achieving the goals for our school, then there won't be a problem.

The next section relatedly focuses on inspiring responsibility for shared visions, as a precursor to empowered decision-making.

Inspired Responsibility for a Shared Vision

An analysis of staff efforts in developing a professional learning community around inspired responsibility for a shared vision revealed the following interactive themes: purposeful visioning, embedded values, systematic structures, and monitoring processes. In terms of inspiring responsibility for a shared vision, high and low readiness schools differed, but to a lesser degree than was evident in shared leadership.

High Readiness Schools

The concept of a shared vision in many schools is often misunderstood and confused with the mission and goals. I am not so certain; these concepts have been clearly distinguished in most of the *high readiness schools* in this study as well. Only one school engaged in a formal visioning process, conducted five years before the project began using a variety of group processes. They perceived this vision as evolving "as faculty change to include everyone's input.

Through total group participation there is a focus on the student and academic and personal success." The faculty visited their vision three times a year – fall, mid-year, and year-end, collecting and analyzing data and updating as needed. Participation in this vision separated this school from the rest, through its history, it systematic process, and its involvement of the whole school, parents, and community.

This community continues to ask, "What would be the documentation that we have become a model school?" They are intentional. They measured their progress, and celebrated their progress through the following philosophy, "Show not Tell". The principal expressed that, "We will celebrate because what you have to do with change is create an event and an event will create change and if you don't have one you create one." This principal maintained that,

> Developing a shared vision requires collaboration, broad input, ongoing feedback and readjustment by design. A vision needs to be knowledge-based, realistic, workable and based on achievable goals...more strategies with coaching, portfolios, rubrics, exhibitions, action research, and focus on student achievement. A successful vision is built on a shared orientation and a common vocabulary. We have a plan for everything; nothing happens by accident anymore. Visioning should be proactive and responsive to changing trends and needs within the school and community.

The teacher representative from this distinguished, high readiness school added,

> Even the recalcitrant teachers have softened – informal get-togethers show that it's on people's minds. It's always at the forefront. There is a strong informal culture related to vision based around curriculum, instruction and students. Internal communication structures exist to operationalize the vision.

Even at this level, the teacher indicated that they were beginning to falter and that the SEDL project refocused their efforts, and created a deeper trust among teachers.

In all other schools, except one, the vision was expressed in multiple sentences, describing, rather than stating it concisely. One pair of interviews indicated that, " a district vision exists, but the school goals are what drive decisions." This was more typical in smaller

schools that used their district visions. Another teacher stated that staff use the following statement for direction, "

> Is it good for kids? Vision is the litmus test for decision-making. We have a staff that is highly committed to student academic success. Our vision is to improve student learning and knock down barriers that prevent student learning.

Others defined their vision as the current change topic, i.e., Alternative Education project, Alliance, Standards and Benchmarks, Technology, etc. Schools with lower student performance saw the vision as "trying not to be a targeted school" – improving test scores. The test was the touchstone. In contrast, schools with higher student performance saw the vision as moving beyond the tests to the next level.

Visioning is a process and it appears to be emerging in these schools with a focus on student learning. Multiple structures are in place in these schools that function systematically – usually an off shoot of some type of strategic planning that focuses on the vision or a needs assessment. Before the project began, principals often talked about school activities, but did not focus on the school's vision. According to one principal, at the beginning of the SEDL project,

> The vision or mission varied from teacher to teacher. Teachers now feel excited about what the children are learning. They are beginning to express concerns such as, 'What will happen to our children after they leave here?' They are asking how to make change happen so that good things will continue to happen for our children.

Others spoke of changing norms, "We were isolated but now we have come together." These schools value continuous improvement, collaboration and student learning and structure activities to support these values. A teacher expressed, "Our vision, the bottom-line, is all students will be successful. We will do what it takes and you can't find that because it's different for every kid. Whatever it takes." Staff meetings, for the most part, focused on curriculum and instruction issues. For instance, one teacher noted, "We align our curriculum in those staff

meetings." Other teachers noted that staff meetings focused on standards and benchmarks, and assessment of progress toward accomplishing school goals.

The vision of the school was usually seen as "shared" in the sense that virtually everyone supported the school vision, but in some cases the explanations by teachers and principals seemed to lead toward a vision that was created by the principal and then shared "with" the staff to endorse. In response to how the vision was developed, one teacher expressed, "I believe that it came from the principal." However, another teacher stated it like this,

> Our principal is the visionary. She has a vision for the school of what she wants it to be, but expects us and we expect it of ourselves, to come up with the innovations that are going to help us meet that vision where it's a school where kids respect each other, respect their facilitators [teachers] and become empowered learners.

Most visions that were cited generally linked to the school improvement plans.

Visions were monitored where they existed and were seen as ongoing. However, one principal expressed the challenge of maintaining momentum,

> We feel that the mission of the school is an ongoing task. Because they [teachers] are inexperienced, they have a tendency to get discouraged. That's where the collaboration, the team building has been so vital for us. We have come together, talking out difficulties. The vision has been shared, embraced and is articulated by me every opportunity that we have...constantly keeping that in the forefront and constantly trying to support, and give them resources that will support implementation.

Another principal suggested that, "[you must] always look at what you are doing...what is working...abandoning it if it doesn't work, coming back to it, redefining – constant continual improvement." In a different school, a teacher maintained, "We're always in continuous improvement, everyday in every way." Others expressed frustration with competing efforts, a lack of resources and fragmentation, "We have several areas that we're trying to work on, probably too many at one time." Still others revealed distracters, such as limited resources and construction of new building facilities.

Low Readiness Schools

In *low readiness schools*, shared visions did not exist and the desire to create them was mixed on the part of teachers. In most schools, principals and teachers denied having a shared vision. Most respondents talked about student learning, but collaboration and commitment to the vision were not shared or valued by their faculty as a whole. One principal indicated that,

> We want what's best for kids, but don't know how to get to that point. We aren't on the same page. It's more of an individualized thing. Teachers see themselves as autonomous units not working together. I don't see progress. People are aware but they aren't doing anything about it.

Another principal described pockets of interest, but not,enough to make a difference. "Not all of the team has a complete commitment to the task. We are drawing on others to bring them into the fold by meeting regularly with team members and using their suggestions." Some respondents believed that they had a shared vision, but could not articulate what it was or how it was manifested in day-to-day behavior.

Many obstacles were raised in the interviews including: a lack of parent involvement, external pressures, a lack of trust and unwillingness to change. One principal from a low-income school lamented the apathy of parents toward their children's learning. Her vision was limited, "Our vision is to love the children and take care of them." A series of factors emerged from another principal,

> high turnover, low pay, a break in continuity...It's difficult to get a sense of family. Some fit and some don't. The shared vision belongs to the people who return. Many others are not certified and can't stay – nothing to do with the vision.

One teacher shared his frustration related to his colleagues' resistance to change and improvement,

> The older faculty don't see the need to change. They have no desire to be introspective and look at themselves and what they can do to improve their teaching methods and

> improve the school. They aren't willing to look at the broader picture and see we aren't doing the job we need to be doing. They think it's everyone's fault but ours.

This attitude was fueled by a lack of trust and openness, not uncommon across schools. Comments from principals and teachers in low readiness schools suggested they were just beginning to break through some of these barriers. One teacher indicated,

> Just to get to the point where we could trust and talk freely to each other about issues related to education has been an obstacle to overcome. We had to lay the groundwork to get to shared vision. We see it as something that comes on the heels of shared leadership.

Another teacher bemoaned the slow pace of change, "On a continuum we are at the very beginning, but I believe we've made progress. Teachers are beginning to open up, to an extent, not as much as we'd hoped." Others stated that they felt their teachers perceived commitment to student learning as lip service, and that the status of and expectations for teachers needed to be reexamined, before teachers would be motivated to comply.

In some cases the vision was perceived as belonging to the principal, therefore it lacked meaning and ownership among staff. One principal illustrated this attitude in the following statements,

> don't see the school where it needs to be in terms of shared vision. I see the vision as some buying into what needs to be done, some straddling the fence, and some not sure what direction they want to go. I take that as a challenge as well as a charge...to get them to see the vision needs to be about collaboration and addressing the assessed needs that were identified as it relates to the total educational process in the school.

Principals and teachers interviewed were consistent in their commitment to student learning, thus mirroring their counterparts in the high readiness schools. However, in contrast, most schools focused on improving test scores in lieu of creating a shared vision. Frustration and anxiety were evident in these comments made by teachers and principals who wanted more for their students:

> We need to reach the 30% on the Iowa Tests in order not to be under state remediation.
>
> Focus on student learning...test taking. We're worried about having them do well on the test rather than having them actually learn deep knowledge.
>
> We need to focus on test scores and bring our children up to standards or where we want them to be. You know, to raise our test scores, I think that is going to be our priority right now – to see our strengths and continue with those and also look at our weaknesses and see what we can do to improve them.
>
> Our vision is to pass the state test. Let us get out of there so we don't get put into remediation. But I think there's more. We want these kids to really grab more than, hey, come on, let's just pass the test. I mean we want to really put inside of them somethings that, hey, the world can be different than the world they know.

Some schools are taking action as one principal noted whose staff is collaborating around a common issue, meeting regularly, and discussing students' grades, concerns and problems:

> We need to be in the same boat rowing in the same direction. Our vision is student learning. Everyone works together to help students improve test scores by accommodating skills learned in one class to another. Tests are made in the standardized form in order to give the students the opportunity to become familiar with the test form. The lines of subject areas have been erased, and teachers are collaborating to discuss content outside the realm of their particular subject areas.

Empowered decision-making

An analysis of staff efforts in developing a professional learning community around empowered decision-making revealed the following interactive themes: deep and focused governance structures, systematic processes, and embedded decision-making. In terms of empowered decision-making, high and low readiness schools varied significantly.

High Readiness Schools

In *high readiness schools*, principals focused on building trust and involving all staff at various stages in the decision-making process. Multi-interrelated structures existed that were characterized by active, focused and productive involvement of staff. Generally, these structures focused on teaching and learning and appeared in the form of: leadership teams, grade level and

subject area teams, vertical teams, advisory councils, special committees, special activities, parent groups, task forces, and hiring committees. Teachers worked collaboratively across grade levels and shared responsibility for decisions regarding student learning. Principals monitored these processes and created pathways for success.

In these schools, decisions were made in groups of people who were closest to the issue. One principal reported "rotating responsibilities... and building a support system across staff. She expressed that "teachers want to make decisions regarding the curriculum being used and are having a choice in the adoption of new texts." The principal asserted that empowerment was critical as she often reminds her staff, "I'll be gone, but you'll still be here. You need to decide how you want the school to be."

Most teachers want a voice in issues that touch the heart of the school and have a direct effect on students – issues related to teaching and learning. Several principals acknowledged working on their listening skills to gain respect and establish trust. One principal revealed, "The teachers respect each other and most respect me. I am building supportive conditions by letting them make decisions that most affect them." The teacher in this school viewed the principal as an advocate for teachers and students, encouraging site-based decision-making in the truest sense. In restructuring this school according to the school's vision, "teachers abandoned an out-dated computer lab, and hired an additional paraprofessional...abandoned a gifted and talented pull-out program, and implemented an inclusion model." In another school, teachers felt fortunate to have an administration that valued their opinions and was willing to listen. The teacher contended that,

> the whole school is involved in exchange and sharing. There is a high degree of trust and shared decision-making, mutual respect between teachers and administrators. Administrators trust that teachers know what's best for students. New teachers are

> surprised. They are not used to being listened to at the top. Often they come from more of a dictatorship.

In this school, the leadership team trained facilitators from all grade levels and disciplines. As one principal stated, "It is important to take the time, not just to bring in new things, but to talk about how do we, organizationally, support each other in this learning process and in making decisions."

Moreover, in some schools teachers were given the budget and asked to plan staff development at the school level in lieu of having it dictated at the district level. One principal emphasized,

> It's up to the teachers. They know what they need. I'm not going to make the decision for them. I know that by giving them the budget they are more in control of the money. It's being spent on what they need.

One school had cadres that "divides up the problems and works toward solutions. We meet and present the solutions until the school comes to a consensus." Collectively, teachers and principals revealed that before the SEDL project, input was most often afforded a select group of teachers, whereas now input is requested throughout the organization. People were learning how to talk with one another, reach consensus, and determine appropriate decision-making patterns.

In high readiness schools, teachers were beginning to gain a sense of the "big picture" and, in some cases, decisions were data-driven, monitored, and evaluated. One principal described the process of empowered decision-making in detail. She felt that by analyzing the data, she could easily make some decisions herself, but chose to share information and elicit opinions from various levels of the organization until consensus was reached. She gained consensus by saying, "Nobody is going to walk out of this room and say, 'They made us do this.'

It doesn't matter how great we think things are going to be because if they don't like it or do it, it is just not going to work."

In another school, one principal described how the entire staff had input into the first banked day since the project began.

> They were real instrumental in the use of our first banked day in terms of talking about ideas as to how the day would work, taking those ideas back to their teams, finding out what people wanted through surveys, and helping to organize information to determine our agenda. I'm very pleased at getting across the idea that I'm not the only person capable of making decisions or having good ideas.

Decisions in high readiness schools are most often tied to school goals. As one teacher noted, "The planning for the next year starts with our goals and then is translated into the budget and decisions that we make when we sit down to write the goals." Again, teachers and principals noted that although structures and processes were in place, the SEDL project helped them "fine tune" and relate them more directly to the vision and goals of their schools. As one teacher maintained,

> When everybody is involved in a decision-making process, that results in discussions which lead to understanding what the common vision is, where we ought to be. If our Campus Improvement Plan is used properly, we meet with the faculty to discuss it and produce a plan that really articulates the faculty as a whole.

Each person's personal knowledge and insight adds to the whole, enriches the quality of the vision, and ensures ownership across levels.

While recognizing the value of shared leadership or responding to the local mandate to organize in this way, all the schools built structures for shared decision-making. The contrasts between high and low readiness schools were not so much in procedural decisions as they were in their actual operation. In the high readiness schools, the principals and teachers described a fluid, ever-changing arrangement that responded to the immediate needs of the school.

Low Readiness Schools

Decisions in *low readiness schools* were usually made by leadership teams, or other small "autonomous units", thus excluding a significant number of the total staff. The structures were described as more formal and less developed than the informal, yet systematic structures evident in high readiness schools. Several school structures were relatively new and they were evolving through typical group process changes. For instance, in one school the leadership council, with representation from each subject area was established to work to achieve common goals and make decisions that affected school policy. In a somewhat autonomous fashion, a teacher described a typical process; "The committee will listen to a teacher's proposal and then decide if it is good for the welfare of the school."

The staff in low readiness schools was more reactive to problems rather than proactive and creative. Nonetheless, teachers were becoming more open, and decision-making structures were expanding and becoming more focused. As one teacher stated, "There is broadening membership on committees. Members are appointed by their peers who are beginning to focus on curricular issues. Experts are stepping forward. Teachers are facilitating faculty meetings."

A lack of trust was evident when principals invited input, yet also reserved veto power and merely granted the appearance of empowerment. One teacher revealed that the principal "is willing to hear our opinions, take advice, and admits to not having all the answers, but she makes the decisions." The illusion of empowered decision-making was also depicted rather poignantly by one teacher who expressed that teacher were

> very disempowered systematically within the [larger structure], where they feel like they are empowering us, but they come back and second-guess us on the decisions we make. It's not true empowerment. True empowerment is giving someone, in my opinion, the trust.

In other schools, principals took on a more passive role and promoted a freedom of choice resulting in fragmentation and lack of focus. Decisions were at times made by consensus, but were often unrelated to student learning.

Discussion and Conclusions

Recent efforts to reform and restructure schools through federal, state, and local monitoring and accountability systems are embedded in the assumption that teachers will not produce unless coerced and controlled (Clark & Astuto, 1994). This notion places continual doubt on the professionalism of teachers and diminishes sincere efforts to work toward achieving individual and organizational purposes. The role of the principal is vital in creating conditions that build capacity and promote a sense of efficacy. In turn, as teachers feel efficacious and valued, they reinforce the principal's attitude and behavior (Hipp, 1997). These interactions may cause principal to relinquish their need to control and to promote teacher commitment to organizational purposes. The impact lies in the collective energies of all members of the school community to move beyond mandates and externally controlled systems in order to improve practices that affect teaching and learning.

DuFour and Eaker (1998) asserted that the best hope for reform lies in the creation of schools as professional learning communities. However, Fullan (2000) sheds doubt on, what may be considered, "distant dreams" without radical reculturing. Not only does this pertain to single efforts, but whole school reform and an infrastructure to institutionalize it. School reform will require connectedness (Fullan, 2000; Bivins-Smith, 1996), driven by values and vision, and a passionate effort by *all* members of school community to achieve a level of excellence that does not currently exist. In order for reform efforts to achieve intended results, schools cannot get by with just doing enough.

This paper provides a snapshot into 19 diverse school settings that have committed to whole school reform to make a meaningful difference in the lives of their students. The schools in this study reflect schools across our nation and represent various levels of readiness. Earlier findings in these schools indicated that "although schools are attending to many things, many of them are not attending to matters that make a difference in the way schools operate and in the outcomes for students" (Olivier, Cowen & Pankake, 2000). In light of these findings, Hord's (1997) five-dimensional model offers a comprehensive design to achieve these results. The key factor in our findings was the leadership of the principal. The evidence indicated that leadership practices in high readiness schools were more effective than those in low readiness schools in all areas under study: shared leadership, inspiring responsibility for a shared vision, empowered decision-making, and inclusivity of staff.

Principals in high readiness schools were not coercive or controlling; they shared leadership, imaging it in the likeness of new conceptions of leadership (Ellis & Joslin, 1990; Lambert, 1998; Rost, 1993). This has required a shift in perspective; all leaders can be followers and all followers can be leaders. Evidence indicated that the focus on capacity building was purposeful and reinforced, as staff members increasingly became open to changing roles and responsibilities. The principal's belief in the capabilities of teachers and the trust level reported by respondents was evident in broad participation through both formal and informal structures. The principals in these schools let go of power and nurtured the human side and expertise of their people. Thus, they gained collective commitment to continuous improvement and student learning.

Principals in high readiness schools were selective in their focus on a shared vision. Some elicited the dreams of others, while some shared their own visions and sought to mobilize

efforts accordingly. Some were more successful than others. Those who co-created or presented an agreed upon vision seemed to have buy-in; those who imposed their visions looked for more. The success that was apparent in the single school that engaged in a comprehensive visioning process with all stakeholders offers lessons for others. Their vision was purposeful, it required broad participation, it had ownership from all involved in the teaching and learning process, and it was linked to school improvement. Clearly the focus in these schools differed from low readiness schools, particularly in that visions moved beyond test scores. Multiple structures were in place that embraced and built upon espoused values centered on student learning and continuous learning.

The principals in high readiness schools empowered decision-making through deep and focused governance structures and systematic processes that were embedded in the school as a whole. However, data-driven decision-making processes were limited in the details of respondents. In professional learning communities, teachers and administrators gather information, make decisions, and implement those decisions (Hord, 1999). We also found the greater the sense of direction and information communicated; the greater the alignment. Alignment led to empowerment in these schools through the principal's trust, support, openness to input, and unsolicited perspectives. Unlike traditional implementation of site-based decision-making, responsibilities were dispersed and staff had significant voice in decisions related to teaching and learning. Collectives and individuals with expertise or a stake in the outcome made the decisions. Empowered decision-making was more than appearance.

A decade ago, in Restructuring America's Schools, Lewis (1989) asserted that, "If schools are, as some charge, ' dismal places to work and learn,' it is because people have created them as such" (p. 220). The intent of this paper was not to disclose the successes of existing

professional learning communities, for these answers elude even the most experienced researchers. Instead, our purpose was to report preliminary findings from the *Creating Continuous Communities of Inquiry and Improvement* project, in its attempt to examine the readiness levels of schools attempting to create inclusive, vibrant, and enduring places of learning. We have tried to capture the details of schools in the midst of purposeful change to provide insights into their successes and struggles. In turn, if success is achieved, the details of their journey will not be lost. The map each school will follow will differ because of their unique contexts, issues, and people. This study is ongoing and data is currently being collected school-wide through interviews, surveys, and field notes. Once analyzed within and across schools, new findings will provide us with further direction.

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